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AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/09/18
TAGS: MARR PREL EN
SUBJECT: Estonians Calm on Missile Defense Announcement

REF: STATE 96550

CLASSIFIED BY: Marc Nordberg, Political/Economic Chief; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

¶1. (SBU) Pol Chief delivered reftel points to Paul Teesalu, Director of the MFA's Security Policy Division, on September 17. Teesalu said he had been expecting such an announcement, and that he understood the reasoning for changing U.S. missile defense plans. He added that Estonia looks forward to working on future missile defense planning through NATO, and will be interested to learn where the U.S. places elements of the phased system.

¶2. (C) Other reactions in Estonia were equally muted. In a discussion September 18 with Pol Chief, Chairman of Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee Sven Mikser expressed the strongest (although still low key) opinions. Mikser also said he understands USG reasoning, but fears many in Estonia will view this announcement as a victory for Russia. By opposing deploying missile defense elements in Poland and the Czech Republic, Mikser explained Russia stood to win regardless of outcome - Russia could demand concessions if the bases were built, or claim victory if they were not.

¶3. (C) In recent days Marko Mihkelson, Chairman of Parliament's European Union Affairs Committee, and Toomas Kukk, Foreign Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister, separately told Pol Chief that any backing away from deploying missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic would be seen as a sign the U.S. is less engaged in Central and Eastern Europe. Mihkelson publicly said September 18 that the U.S. is less focused on the region now than it was five years ago, but that the missile defense decision does not pose any threat for Estonian security. Kukk, however, on September 18 told Pol Chief that there was no such concern in the PM's office.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: This missile defense announcement will likely have some slight negative resonance in Estonia. Estonians often view relations with Russia in zero-sum terms - what is good for Russia must be bad for the West. Therefore many are a little uncomfortable that Russia may have "won" this round. Estonians are also very sensitive to any signs that the U.S., seen as their main guarantor of stability, is paying less attention to the region. In this case, we benefitted from good timing. The day of the missile defense announcement Foreign Minister Paet was in Washington meeting Secretary Clinton and NSA Jones. Two days earlier U.S. F-15s visited Estonia for joint training. These concrete signs of bilateral engagement shared the media space with the missile defense news, reassuring many that the USG remains engaged with Estonia.
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